

added huskily. "You're a Princess, if ever one lived!" He sounded the light in her frank brown eyes, finding there nothing but the truth. "Goodbye," he murmured. "God keep you as you are!"

AND Thurley sat down when the door had closed, wondering at it all. She was there when Alice entered, excited by new events.

"The Duke has been here for nearly fifteen minutes!" she said. "And now here's the Baron and Wenck!"

"I know," said the "Princess," smiling faintly. "I wrote and asked them to come."

"Good Lord!" said Alice. "Talk about the Sphinx! I just saw number two go out—Aeton, of course, and looking more as if he had found himself than I think I somehow expected."

"Oh, I'm glad!" said Thurley honestly. "That makes me very happy!"

Alice looked her puzzlement. After all her hopes, she was nearly convinced that Gaillard still possessed the girl's real heart, in spite of all that had happened. "The Duke is wearing out his shoes, his pockets, and his intellect," she stated in her customary spirit. "Will you have him in with his tamer, or alone?"

Thurley smiled a little wearily. "He probably prefers to come alone, like all the others."

"You poor dear child!" said Alice, and kissed her in sympathy and love.

#### Chapter XLVIII. A Climax

THE something boyishly honest in the Duke—a charming quality that Thurley had previously enjoyed—beset her now as she faced him candidly, resolved to win him to the plan that she felt would make for the happiness of all. He was dressed as Colonel of the Baron's Regiment von Seydlitz, and was splendid and good to see. She found the matter difficult, in the light of his repeated protestations that he would not return to Hertzogotha without her and that Kingdoms were hateful in his sight.

"You see you haven't been fair," she said, smiling to take away the sting. "When you knew I was not the Princess, but the merest no-one in America, you treated me quite as if you had never met your fiancée and were ready to let me think you thought I was she. You'll admit to me now that you knew it all from the first?"

He nodded. "And that I was your slave also, from the first."

She laughed at his gravity. "But nobody wants a little cheat."

"It is true; yet everybody wants a little Princess."

"But I'm not!"

"But you are!"

"Oh, we're wasting such a lot of time!" she said. "I just know you're ashamed of the way you are treating Princess Thirvinia! I know that deep in your heart of hearts your sense of duty to your country cries out as love could never cry, that you know you must go, and you wish to go—and take the Princess with you as your bride! I shouldn't like you in the least if you were any other way. And you want me to like you a little?"

"Oh, God of Love!" he answered, as only a tragic youth may answer. "But surely you can like me a little for myself?"

She was very much in earnest. "Not a particle if you abandon your affianced Princess, your distracted Kingdom, or the nobler self I wish so much to admire."

"But when I love you!" he protested. "Is that nothing?"

"No," she laughed; "it's a nuisance—to everyone but me. But the love of a man who deserts his country and his honor—Oh!"

His sense of shame, only a little narcotized by the brilliance and appeal of her beauty, struggled in his heart. "But—Princess, I am helpless," he declared. "What can I do?"

"Shake hands and say goodbye," she answered readily. "Promise you'll make your genuine Princess happy, and serve your land, and let me call the Baron here and tell him how greatly I admire you."

"The Baron?" he echoed. "He is not here?"

"Of course," said Thurley. "I wrote him to come. I'll ask him now—"

Her sentence was never completed.

A GLARE of blinding light that penetrated the window's thickest curtains flashed from without, in the snowbound park. A terrifying detonation, shattering glass and rocking the house, instantly followed, with a jar and a shock as if of some world disaster. Shrieks and screams from the avenue, some one's cry within the building, and a heterogeneous medley of alarms arose on the second of full that followed the thud and impact of the explosion.

Then the door was flung open and Alice was there, wild eyed and gasping, horrified by the dreadful things she had fully expected to discover in the room where Thurley had been left.

"Deary!" she cried. "Thank God! I thought—"

"Karl!" cried the voice of the Baron at her heels, and he ran in after Alice, as certain as she that here in this room a dynamite bomb had been fired.

"What was it?" cried Thurley, abruptly possessed of a dread that seemed to cast her back to her recent frights and perils. "What has happened?"

"Oh, I thought I should die before I could reach the door!" said Alice, pale and fearfully shaken. "It must have been out in the street!"

The Baron had hastened at once to a window. Wenck had been instantly ordered outside to see what might be done.

"Ah, in the park!" said Hochhaus, enormously relieved, and the others hastened to see.

A crowd had gathered in the street below with promptness truly amazing. A swarming, excited mass of be-

ings it was, with men swiftly running from all directions, and cabs, automobiles, and busses congregating in the dark, congested throng.

It was all half lighted only, by the street lamps gleaming through the trees. In the snow of the park the congress had its center, and Wenck, escaping from the turbulent eddy of beings, came hastening back to report.

"Pelevin!" he said to his chief at once, and Thurley nearly sank where she stood.

Someway, the creature, with a gas-pipe engine of death and destruction in his hand, had exploded his horrible implement prematurely, there at the wall of the frozen park, on his way to cross the avenue and enter Alice's basement.

The Duke was gray as ashes. "My God! what I should bring on this house!" he said, and Thurley, dimly hearing, understood.

They were spared a detailed account of the mangled form across the crowded thoroughfare; but of fright they could not be relieved. The Baron, the Duke, and Wenck at length departed, Karl-Wilhelm matured in his manhood and resolution suddenly, by the shock to his nerves and his heart.

He took the time for one long look of gravity into Thurley's eyes, while her fearless gaze met his own. "You had already taught me my duty, believe me," he said, his face strangely hardened to that of a man. "I trust I shall always merit a little of your admiration—Princess Thurley." He raised her hand to his lips, kissed it reverently, and retreated backward from the room.

LATE that night, when Thurley looked down on the avenue and park, at last once more deserted, only a great gaping orifice, where snow and earth and rock had been, marked the spot of Pelevin's last venture. Then Alice came in, still white and quaking, dressed for retiring, but too disturbed for bed.

"Dear child, dear child!" she said as she came and took her "Princess" in her arms. "No more of my 'innocent' game. I release you from every single promise!"

Thurley looked at her unwinkingly, afraid it meant that, the game being done, she was due to be dismissed and return whence she had come.

"No more?" she said. "You won't need me any longer?"

"For Heaven's sake, Deary, what do you mean?" demanded Alice, equally disturbed. "Need you? I never needed anyone so much in all my life! I simply intended to release you from all the foolish agreements I exacted! I realize the dangers I have plunged you in. I realize how selfish I should be, after all you've undergone, to deny you the slightest speck of happiness. That's all. If you wish to marry Aeton Gaillard—"

"Alice!" cried Thurley, all but ready to laugh, despite the tragic outcome of the evening. "Marry Aeton Gaillard!"

"You lent him your money, and—"

"Oh, I'll get it all back and return it to you gladly," interrupted Thurley, who had troubled her mind without respite over all the things she had done. "I didn't realize it was not really mine to give. I wanted him to beat the Count—and he did! I acted impulsively, of course, I know; but I'll surely restore every cent I used and—"

"Thurley Ruxton, what are you talking about, you silly little thing?" demanded Alice, unable to let her continue further. "That money was just as much yours as the hair of your head. You ought to be spanked, to treat me so!" But with tears in her eyes she clasped the girl against her breast and strained her there with all her strength. "You know that I love you. You know I approve of every single thing you've done—at last! If you wish to marry Mr. Gaillard, I know that—somehow—he must be splendid!"

"But I don't," objected Thurley. "I don't see why you ever thought I could!"

Alice pushed herself away and looked her squarely in the eyes. "I'm a kitten under nine days old," she said. "Maybe you'd rather not marry anyone at all."

Thurley suddenly crimsoned; but the light in her eyes increased. "I admit it would have been awfully sweet to let Robley ask me, riding that morning in the snow," she said; "but I wanted to keep the promise made to you."

Alice's eyes were abruptly brimming. "You poor, dear, darling little girl!" she said, attempting to laugh, but achieving something nearer to a sob. "Let me call him up on the 'phone.'"

#### Chapter XLIX. A Trysting Place

THE telephone was not disturbed that night. A mere metal wire has frequently warmed and tingled at the voice of Cupid, speeding down its length; but Thurley had plans that were all her own, as well as a number of things to say, that took no account of instruments that render distance between the principals obligatory.

Sometime late that Friday night Gotham weather changed. A warm wind, drifting a tropical temperature from Tampa to the bleakness of New England, wrapped all the world of Manhattan in its voluptuous embrace and melted the snow from its bosom.

The morning broke with crystal clearness, the sun all gold in a turquoise sky, and the summery breeze now languidly puffing at eddying pools of melted snow till they withered and floated away.

The only mar in all the perfect morning was supplied by the city newspapers. Their accounts of the end of the miserable Pelevin, almost unanimously pronounced a Black Hand agent, whose plot had opportunely miscarried, served to reawaken fears already sufficiently sleepless.

But youth is retentive of joys and hopes where alarms

find but temporary lodgment. Thurley was young, and her heart was too full of her own excitements to permit large room for dreads.

She passed the morning in a constant succession of fevers and doubts concerned alone with Robley Stuyverant. But leaning on Alice for assistance was enormously sustaining; for Alice certainly helped. It was she who telephoned at last to Stuyverant, when the psychological moment had arrived.

That was at two in the afternoon.

"Just called you up to relieve your mind and set a misconception straight," she told him cheerily. "That loan, you know, of thirty thousand, to a certain individual? It was the prettiest two-edged stroke I've seen for an age. Yes. It floored a certain Count and paralyzed its recipient like a million volts coming from a hairpin. No; I'll tell you all about it later. Why, I'm trying to inform you delicately. She did it because she wanted to squelch them both. Yes, I thought perhaps you'd like to know where to find her. No, she isn't here. I don't know exactly where she is, myself. Now listen intently. She said she was going over in the park—to some wonderfully romantic spot where some one broke his wrist one day,—but for what earthly reason is more than mortal could guess. Now wait! Don't hurry! Robley!" But there was silence on the wire.

THURLEY, at a little past the hour of two, was seated alone on that particular bench she had one day occupied when all the world, though clothed in the splendors of its autumn gold and crimson, was a gray and desolate perspective, so far as she could discern its wide expanse.

Today the sun obliquely slanted on denuded trees and on grass downbeaten and sodden from the recent snow, as well as on roads that, here in the sections of the park unfavored by the pomp and glory of wealth, were practically deserted. Yet gleams of the world's most refulgent light seemed beckoning on all her far horizon, and, though she still had doubts and tremors, interspersed with all her hopes, the prospect seemed a verdant field of flowers and rills and song.

A plump gray squirrel, bright eyed, cack in his fur, and confident of friendship from the whole human tribe, came inquiringly up, to halt at Thurley's feet and beg for alms to crack. He tucked first one, then the other, of his tiny paws in the muff of his little breast, gazing at her appealingly and flirting the banner of his tail.

"Hello!" said Thurley. "If I'd only thought to bring a bag of peanuts!"

Her hungry little visitor leaped up to the bench, came fearlessly up to walk across her lap, poked his active little nose against the glove on her hand, then leaped again to the earth and weather trampled sod, where he took up a search for hidden treasures.

Thurley had turned to watch him, when the faint, distant purring of a motor car spun her about on the seat. Stuyverant came round the bend, holding the wheel as best he might with a wrist still unequal to the task.

THE color leaped to Thurley's cheeks like rose leaves tossed upward in a zephyr. Then the car was halted and Stuyverant rose to leap out of his extra tires, as he had on the first occasion.

"Oh, don't try that!" cried Thurley, her old impulsive self immediately uppermost, as she sprang to her feet and ran a little toward the car. "Please don't break anything more!"

He laughed, despite the depth of emotions in his breast, alighting quite intact.

She stood in the road to meet him, and gave him her hand as he came there, doffing his cap.

"You know I don't like threes, exactly," he added, "if it means three injuries, or anything like that."

"I wonder if you'll ever meet me here again?" he answered, as they turned to go to her bench. "That's the sort of threes I've hoped for—the threes with nothing but charm."

"But—they might not be—that kind—after all," she faltered, resuming the seat she had occupied. "It's so easy these days for folks to be deceived—to deceive themselves—and—everything."

He sat beside her and leaned a little forward. His face was inclined to paleness again; his eyes were intensely serious. "I think I have deceived myself for the final time—concerning some few things at least," he said, referring to his errors of judgment respecting Gaillard and her loan. "I hope today may render possible some final understandings."

His earnestness a little disconcerted the happiness of spirit she had instantly conceived at his coming. She could only infer that he had come upon truths he found not altogether pleasant. "I have never wished to deceive you for a moment," she said. "I made up my mind to tell you everything—absolutely everything—today."

It was Stuyverant's turn to be surprised and puzzled. "Everything, you mean, about your duties to Hertzogotha? Wait, please, before you answer. This may, perhaps, be our final little talk together—our last sun-bright experience, after the Fates had seemed—I only wish to say that on the morning when we drove together through the snow I spoke unguardedly. The stress of the moment, everything, conspired to wring that declaration from my lips, and yet—"

Her heart was sinking. "You didn't mean it?" She tried to smile as the sunlight seemed about to vanish.

"I have come here to confess and sue for pardon together," he told her, holding her gaze to his own with ties grown sacred and irresistible. "I love you, Princess, despite my utmost wish or sense of the hopeless plight into which I am plunged. I shall love you always, even though I have no right, even though you bid it cease, for its haunting echo in your afteryears. I would give my life to serve you. I would almost give it for this mo-